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A Century-old Mystery January 17

In reviewing some archival documents from the 1920s, the era of Herbert Yardley, the following item caught our attention. The message was sent from the Japanese embassy in Washington, D.C. to Tokyo on June 21, 1920/

ZYYEEXUMDI DOOWFYBABI PITYCUOPKI GAUTLUKIOZ AGLEDOJIXU
MYWYZORORO ATYOIPROSU KAIKMYKYEW LECEHEMYTY CUEMKUZOUN
IZTIZUIKEC etc. etc.

The message was decrypted, probably by Yardley or one of his subordinates, to read; "Nixon, who for many years has rendered great service to this Embassy as a secret service man, is now ill and in need of rest and recuperation for a few months. There is no one like him who in the future could do what he has done for this office, and heretofore his remuneration has been very small, in view of which I wish now to make him a present of \$1,000.00. Please give this special consideration and wire me an immediate reply."

So who is the mysterious Mr. Nixon? On the surface, it might seem that he was on the Japanese payroll, perhaps as a spy. Believing that their diplomatic cryptosystems were secure, the Japanese might have carelessly identified him as one of their agents. It is also possible that Nixon was an alias, hiding his real identity.

The phrasing is curious. The words "secret service" often meant "espionage" or some other intelligence activity --- everywhere in the world except the United States. The U.S. government had an agency subordinate to the Treasury Department known as the Secret Service; it had been founded in the mid-19th century to catch counterfeiters. After the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901, its duties had been expanded include presidential protection, but it had not yet been tasked with the protection of foreign embassies.

A lot of things were possible, but the CCH believes that Nixon was not a spy. Our rationale is that the Japanese made no effort to hide his identity and were so specific in their remarks about him that identification would be rather easy. The

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Soviets, for example, as revealed in the VENONA Project,* provided code names for their spies in the U.S. and elsewhere. CCH believes that the Japanese would have been just as coy, especially in handling someone they described as valuable to them.

Most likely, Nixon was simply a hired U.S. security officer who served at the Japanese embassy for many years. CCH admits that it is rather eager to learn exactly what deeds he performed that the Japanese appreciated so very much, but, for the record, we have been unable to find further information on the mysterious Mr. Nixon. For now, at least, we are sticking to our story.

* VENONA was a U.S Army/NSA project (1943-1980) to exploit Soviet cryptosystems relating to their international espionage organizations. With the assistance of the FBI, the project was eventually able to positively identify a number of Americans on the Soviet payroll. CCH has written about it frequently.

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